Species groups also varied significantly between regions. Crustaceans contributed 22–35 per cent of species number in Alaska, Antarctica, the Arctic, Brazil, California, the Caribbean and Humboldt regions, but only 10 per cent in the Baltic.

Mollusc species were equally varied, comprising 26 per cent of species in Australia and Japan but only 5–7 per cent of the species in the Baltic, California, Arctic and Eastern and Western Canada.

The researchers were also keen to record the endemic species in each region. They found they comprise about half of New Zealand and Antarctic marine species and a quarter of those in Australian and South African waters. The Baltic was found to have just one — a species of seaweed.

They also looked at invasive species. The Mediterranean appears to have suffered most with over 600 species, 4 per cent of those recorded. Most of these appear to have invaded from the Red Sea via the Suez Canal.

But aliens have invaded many other regions, with molluscs, crustaceans and fish the most commonly recorded species. And the enclosed seas — Mediterranean, Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean, China's shelves, and Baltic — were found to have the greatest threats to biodiversity, mostly through human activity as the recent Gulf oil spill demonstrates.

For every species recorded in the census, scientists now believe that at least four have yet to be discovered. They believe that the tropics, deep seas and southern hemisphere hold most of the undiscovered species.

The described marine species, expected to exceed 230,000, will be announced in October. But "at the end of the Census of Marine Life, most ocean organisms still remain nameless and their numbers unknown," says Nancy Knowlton of the Smithsonian Institution.

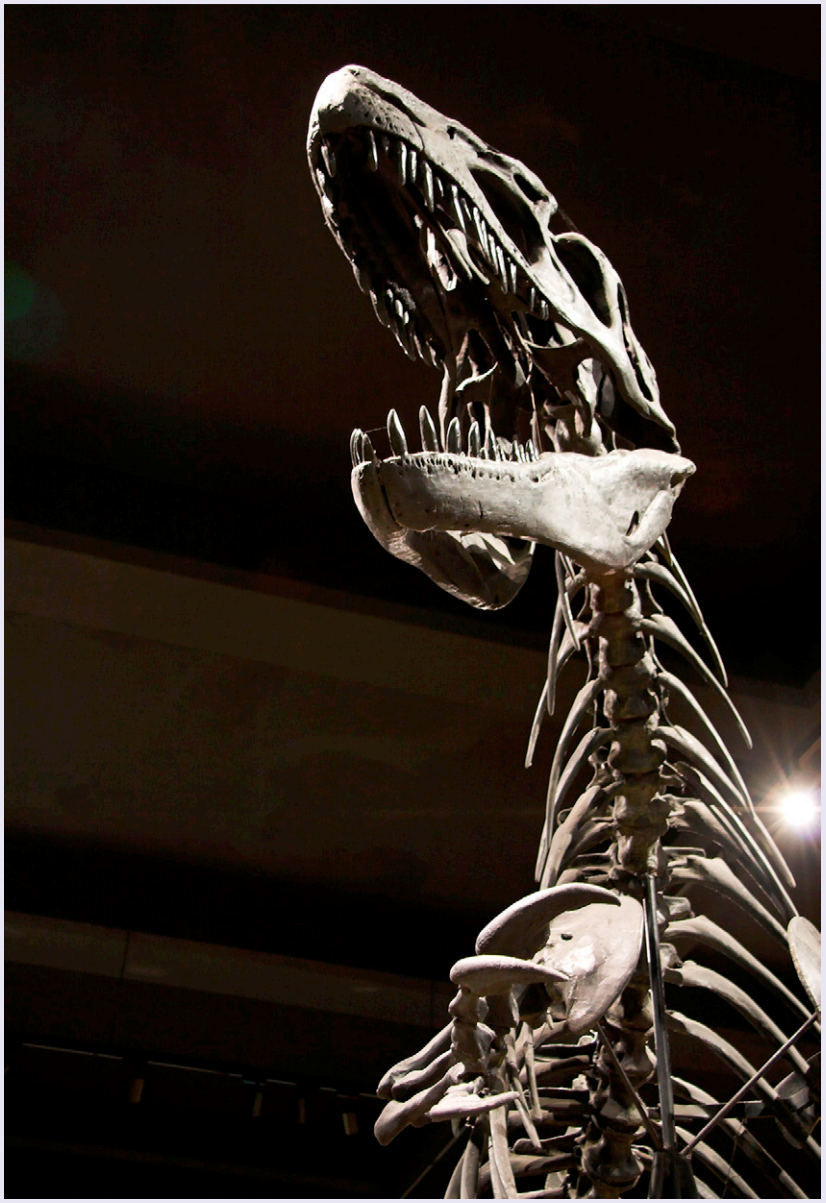
"This is not an admission of failure. The ocean is simply so vast that, after 10 years of hard work, we still only have snapshots, though sometimes detailed, of what the sea contains."

Bone idol

Old bones appear to be becoming increasingly popular amongst private collectors, making life increasingly difficult for museums seeking to increase their collections of dinosaur skeletons. The top auction houses are flagging up the sale of such items. Christie's in Paris has recently sold a family group of Psittacosaurus dinosaur with nine babies and the rare skeleton of a Tricerotops, which sold for 592,250 euros to a private collector, frustrating curators at the Dorchester Dinosaur Museum, who had a private backer to help get the specimen, but it was too expensive.

The film Jurassic Park is thought partly to behind the upsurge in interest. Sotherby's in Paris is now highlighting the sale of an allosaurus skeleton in October estimated to fetch 800,000 euros. It's almost certainly to be on private view.

Nigel Williams



In fashion: Private collectors are showing growing interest in buying fossil skeletons such as an allosaurus like this, still on public display. (Photo: GIPhoto Stock/Alamy.)